

Introduction:

- A. *Illus.*: When my mom decided to move to an assisted living community a few years ago we learned first-hand about downsizing. Some of you have been through this personally or with parents. She moved from a house to one room. It's interesting to peek through the doors of other folks who live there at Spruce Court. Some units are just crammed with stuff—a big dresser, a curio cabinet, quilt rack, two or three favorite chairs and pictures everywhere. Some folks get two adjoining units, not really because *they* need it but because their *stuff* does. And, let's face it—to the rest of us, *two* rooms of stuff doesn't seem like all that much. But all those people—and sooner or later, all of *us*—had to boil life down to just a few basic things.
- B. That brings us to Ecclesiastes. **Eugene Peterson** writes, "*I often think of the Preacher as the garbage collector in the kingdom of God. He goes up and down our alleys and backyards, empties out our wastebaskets and attics, and hauls off everything that has accumulated. He gets rid of those things in life that may have been once good in themselves—we paid a lot for them on one whim or another—but actually divert us from a life of faith in God.*"
- C. **Turn there.** The book of Ecclesiastes gets its name from its main speaker, who is identified in Hebrew as Qoheleth—someone who leads or speaks to an assembly—an *ecclesia* in Latin. Thus, he is the *ecclesiastes*. Qoheleth is a bear to translate: the Preacher, or Teacher; Quester, Spokesman, Philosopher. We'll just call him the Teacher.
- The Teacher identifies himself in v. 1 as "*son of David, king in Jerusalem,*" meaning Solomon. But it isn't really clear that Solomon wrote this. It may be that the author,

writing much later than Solomon, uses Solomon as a character and his narrator. Authors do that sometimes.

- D. [*Light candle*] This book of 12 chapters is part of the Bible's Wisdom Literature, like Proverbs, which would fit well before it, and Job, which would make a good follow-up. **Wisdom literature isn't always easy.** They pose questions, provoke thinking, toy with paradoxes and moral or spiritual puzzles. **But they all rely on one fundamental truth: *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.***
- E. I've never preached Ecclesiastes before because it has always made me nervous. It's a book you might suspect of slipping into the Bible by a side door someone left ajar. You wonder if anyone checked this Teacher's credentials. There have certainly been people going back for centuries who have said, "*How did you get in here?!*"
- F. You don't have to read far to see what I mean: v.2, "*Meaningless! Meaningless!*" says the Teacher. "*Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.*" What is *that* doing in the Bible? And this is no passing thing. That word appears 33 times in this book. 33 times! Surely, that just isn't true! *Is everything meaningless??*
- 'Meaningless,' isn't quite the right idea, not quite the best translation. The Teacher contradicts that idea throughout this book. But I can show you what it means: [*Blow out the candle and point to the smoke.*] He means that "*everything is a mist, a vapor, a puff of wind, a bit of smoke,*" *a breath on a cold morning.* Everything we think matters is as fleeting as smoke, **nothing but hot air.**
- G. In the six weeks we'll spend in Ecclesiastes, we won't cover everything. I hope you'll sit down and read or listen to this book. As Scripture it is very profitable. It has been the surprising doorway to saving faith for some people.

Today, let's take a quick trip through chaps.1-2. Let's begin with:

I. INVESTORS IN SMOKE ARE SOON FORGOTTEN

- A. **V.3**, “*What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun?*” Our Teacher is going to list his labors shortly. Whatever it is you work for, what will you gain? It's a business word and a business question. Gain. P&L. Profit and loss. I remember the first sermon I ever typed on a computer. 1984. I got done but didn't realize it had to be saved. Gone. All gone. Nothing to show for it. Smoke. What would it be like if you found out that *all* your labors were like that?
- B. As I read vv.4-11 notice that he begins talking about “generations” and ends the same way. Notice, too, that he spells out the earth's great, timeless cycles. **Vv.4-11...**
[**v.8**: *Message*: “Everything's boring; utterly boring.”]
[**v.10**: Oh, I know there are astonishing new developments every day but in the grand scheme of things, people don't change. Life isn't really different. What goes around, comes around.]
[**v.11**: Do you know your great-great-grandfather's name? How about his mother? All that transpired in their lives—all they lived for—smoke.]

Neil Diamond wrote a song that had almost nothing but names, including...

Ramar Krishna, Mama Whistler,
Patrice Lumumba and Russ Colombo,
Karl and Chico Marx, Albert Camus.
E. A. Poe, Henri Rousseau,
Sholom Aleichem and Caryl Chessman,
Alan Freed and Buster Keaton too
And each one there
Has one thing shared:

They have sweated beneath the same sun,
Looked up in wonder at the same moon,
And wept when it was all done

For being done too soon.

- C. “*What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun?*” What did all their work profit them? [**Relight candle**] Our labors—wherever it is you pour your energy—are not good investments, any more than an investment in the tides or the weather or a bet on the sun staying dark tomorrow till noon. If you invent a new thing for people see—maybe a video that goes viral—the next day it will be forgotten and we’ll be looking for something else to see, another song to hear. Macbeth mourned...

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle! [**Snuff out**]
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

Smoke.

1:12-18...

II. EVEN IF YOU PURSUE WISDOM, SMOKE GETS IN YOUR EYES

- A. Who better to make sense of life than a philosopher, a sage, a pursuer of wisdom? The Teacher *studied and explored*, as we shall see. Here was someone determined not to be shallow; determined to seek out the meaning of life. He did so at a level more intelligent and inquisitive than anyone else, and he came to this conclusion in **v.13**, “*What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind.*”

- B. Here God is mentioned for the first time. The futility the Teacher saw did not lead him to atheism nor agnosticism. Nor did it prompt him to deny God. But neither does he mince words. *“What a heavy burden God has laid on mankind.”* The young actor, Shia LaBeouf, said, *“Sometimes I feel I’m living a meaningless life, and I get frightened.”* With good reason. A heavy burden.
- C. The burden is described here in v.15, *“What is crooked cannot be straightened; what is lacking cannot be counted.”* *“Life’s a corkscrew that can’t be straightened. A minus that won’t add up.”* [The Message] And that leads him to the conclusion of v.18, *“For with much wisdom comes much sorrow, the more knowledge, the more grief.”* The more you know, the more vivid life’s futility. *“The more you know, the more you hurt.”* [Message] **The smoke gets in your eyes.**

In chap. 2, the Teacher maps out his quest—the things he pursued to find satisfaction. All in vain.

III. IF ALL YOUR LABOR GOES UP IN SMOKE, WHAT’S THERE TO LIVE FOR?

- A. Let’s take a quick tour of all the Teacher tried. **2:1-5, 10...** Pleasures and projects. Imagine all the scenes behind these images; all the years; all the genius and expense. But **v.11...** There’s that word again: *gain*. *“Nothing was gained under the sun.”* After all that, he added nothing to life’s bottom line.
- B. So he weighs the profit to be found in simply making wisdom the goal of life. That sounds more promising. The Bible portrays wisdom as a great treasure. And, sure enough, wisdom is a good pursuit: **v.13-14a,**
I saw that wisdom is better than folly,

*Just as light is better than darkness.
The wise have eyes in their heads
While the fool walks in darkness.”*

Well, that’s a relief. Now we know what to pursue in life.
Wisdom.

- C. But hold on. **V.14b-16...** What’s the difference between a dead sage and a dead fool? Nothing. **Smoke.**
- D. *“So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me.”* [v.17] Now, remember, he’s not talking about a life spent doing some terrible job, or going home after 16 hour days to a bowl of gruel and a haggard wife. Nonetheless, *“all of it is smoke, a chasing after the wind.”* **Everything ventured, nothing gained.**
- E. And here’s yet another blow in **v.18**, *“I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me.”* I was talking with a friend whose politically liberal son-in-law was going on about how he favored “the distribution of wealth.” And my friend said with a rueful laugh, *“That’s my wealth he’s talking about distributing!”* **V.21... If it isn’t bad enough that you die, you can’t even have your legacy live on after you.** It goes to your next of kin, or whoever is left to pick through your stuff, claiming what they want as their own. Smoke!
- F. **So that brings me back to the question, if all your labor goes up in smoke what’s there to live for?** We finally get some answers in **vv.24-26...** Two groups of people are addressed here.

First, in **vv.24-25**, **all people.** Here’s something that is true for anyone anywhere. *You can’t do anything better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in your work. This is from the hand of God, because without God, we wouldn’t have those pleasures.* Does that sound like, “Eat

your vegetables and stop complaining”? No, we really *can't* do better than to enjoy life's basic gifts; *God's* basic gifts. Don't spend your life trying to get more stuff. It's only smoke. Don't expect of pleasure or accomplishments what they cannot deliver. If your work is just trying to make a name for yourself or to retire in wealth, well, it's all smoke. Enjoy what God gives you day to day.

V.26 speaks specifically to the person who sets out in life to please God. To those “*God gives wisdom, knowledge and happiness*” and in *God's economy we profit from the work of fools*. Wisdom is its own delight. Knowledge—especially the kinds of knowledge God gives—is its own treasure. And happiness, distributed from the hand of God, is enough.

None of these things—food and drink, work, wisdom, knowledge or happiness—none of them have a long shelf life. **You can't take them with you.** But you can enjoy them now.

What would your week be like if you determined to enjoy what you have? To enjoy your meals, whether God gives you ramen noodles or roast beef. To find satisfaction in your work, even if you've done it a thousand times. To be grateful for the wisdom and knowledge God has given you (which you'll see if you look for it), and for the happiness that God has blessed you with, even when life is burdensome.

Conclusion:

When my mom decided to downsize, she let go of almost everything. It wasn't a struggle. We'd say, “*Mom, are you sure you don't want to keep this?*” She kept only what she needed, and she lives a more contented life than anyone else at Spruce Court.

She reads her Bible and other books, and she prays. She sits quietly. She enjoys her meals and the friends God has given her. She insists we send her nothing more. She and the Teacher are on the same page, I think. And it is fitting, I think, that my mom's name is Grace.

The conclusion of all the Teacher has to say doesn't come till the very end of the book, so each week we'll jump to that conclusion so that we get his big picture. **Eccl 12:13**,

*Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter:
Fear God and keep his commandments,
for this is the duty of all mankind.*

And that is **not** smoke. [*Light candle*]